

Apr 2

Holy Land, Common Ground: Introduction

nick romanow

The air smells like camels and is filled with chants of “Free Palestine.” Austin may be 7,181 miles away from Israel, but for the afternoon, that Jewish state — and all the controversy that comes with it — is on full display in UT’s East Mall. The event, the Israel Block Party, is billed as a cultural celebration; yet, the heightened presence of police, the drumming of protest songs, and the tension across campus signals that this is much more.

For better or worse, college campuses — especially ours — are not strangers to political activism. When youthful idealism mixes with the quest for one’s own identity, expressions of discontent are nearly inevitable. This university’s location within a liberal city amidst a conservative state amplifies this experience; however, the most contentious issue on campus is hardly one close to home. Many University of Texas students regularly voice a peculiar obsession with the geopolitical struggle between Israel and the Palestinians.

A Hornslink search for “Israel” yields six organizations and does not include the university’s most contentious group, the Palestine Solidarity Committee. These seven bodies are not simply hollow membership lists; they are some of the most visible student organizations with robust social media operations and regular public events. Moreover, no other set of organizations maintains such an ardent opposition towards other campus entities — with the exception of maybe the University Democrats, Young Republicans, and Young Conservatives of Texas.

The Israel Block Party this past Wednesday simply underscores the tense atmosphere on this issue. The Block Party and the protests organized by the Palestine Solidarity Committee were only a few yards apart. Yet, there is a division between these two sides that can't be measured by any known unit. The conflict is so convoluted that there is disagreement about what the disagreement is about. The ideology at the heart of this matter is Zionism. A sign hanging inside the block party defined a Zionist as "a person who supports the right to Jewish self-determination in the Jewish homeland." A handout distributed by the Palestinian Solidarity Committee defines the idea of anti-Zionism as "being opposed to the settler-colonial movement that necessitates the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from their land." It is hard to argue that there is even a minimal amount of overlap between these two conceptions.

I have been exposed to and interested in politics for quite a few years. However, this debate is unlike any other. In the United States, we argue about what percentage our tax rate should be, and we end up shutting the government down over it. This debate is wholly different. It questions who belongs where, where is home, and why is it home. The only obvious similarity between the two sides is their fixation on the land. Both claim multi-generational heritage and intrinsic right to this pocket of the Levant. Both sides have shown that this land is worth fighting for and worth dying for.

This land is so meaningful that it's worth protesting in the rain. It's worth leaving the United States to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces. It's so meaningful that students thousands of miles away take sides and point fingers. Each side has its own narrative that contradicts the other side. Yet, these narratives are central to the identity of the issue. When I spoke to former IDF members, I was struck by how deeply they stood by their service and their nation; they were Americans who felt so strongly for their cause that they entered the Israeli military service right after high school. This is not your typical political rivalry; this is an all-out battle between the hearts and minds of two peoples.

How have these personal stories shaped the discourse on the Israel-Palestine Conflict? How does the campus climate around this conflict impact the perspectives of students? These are questions that aren't easy but are instrumental to how the American public perceives and influences the situation. I hope to answer them by seeking out the stories of campus activists from across the spectrum. I don't expect to resolve this conflict or devise the ultimate peace deal. But I hope to help build a shared understanding and mutual respect among future diplomats, lobbyists, and voters that will undoubtedly inherit this problem. Before we can hope to build a better future, we must be willing to listen and to be vulnerable. Only then we can start to find common ground.

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NICK ROMANOW

Nick Romanow (@nickromanow) is a Canadian-American undergraduate studying International Relations and Global Studies. He writes and debates on issues in foreign policy, diplomacy, and political economy. Nick is also an accomplished distance runner and former member of the Texas Longhorns Track and Field team.

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